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THE STORYTELLER

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When it comes to sales performance, we often listen to “stories” versus looking at the numbers. Details can vary, and sometimes they are what we want to hear instead of the facts and figures, which confirm poor sales performance. Let’s face it - numbers are cold and at times, cruel. They can be downright horrible and cause one to look for an explanation as to why results are so bad.

Having been involved in numerous start-up businesses as well as turnarounds, in my experience, when sales are lacking, the problem is typically connected to sales strategy and execution. A less frequent cause could be a lack of demand or other market-related problems. In any event, stories overshadow actual performance analysis. Stories? What Stories? Here is one: “I am making a lot of calls, but no one is interested.” Or, “Next week is looking up, we have made several presentations this week.” Or, how about this one: “I don’t have enough prospects. We need to increase advertising to get more prospects so that we can increase sales.”

It is human nature to look for answers to problems by using simple or easier solutions, rather than to employ difficult or more complex solutions. Most likely, you are familiar with the quote by Abraham Maslow, “If all you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail.” During a “sales slump,” we want an easy solution to fix the problem, such as more advertising, and in many cases, that won’t solve the issue. Instead, the root cause of the lack of production is an overall bad sales strategy or poor sales process execution.

A few years ago, I was involved in a situation that well illustrates this issue. I was working on a start-up of a new senior living community in Arizona, and about the same time, the company was also opening another brand-



new community in Georgia. The sales results at the Georgia community were terrible, and during company-wide sales meetings, the Georgia sales team consistently reported that no one was interested in their location. They did not have enough new prospects. They would repeatedly ask for suggestions on how to attract individuals to their community because traffic was so bad. They even resorted to having a “sign spinner” on the busiest street closest to the community, since it was located on a side street. By the way, the location of the community was one of the other reasons the sales team cited as to the low interest, slow traffic, and poor sales results.

During this time, I filled the community in Arizona to near capacity, and soon after that, I received a request to take over the sales efforts in Georgia. I agreed to go but was more than a little concerned since I had been listening to stories that had been circulating within the company for months about the community’s low demand. I left Arizona and started driving to Georgia, reflecting as I drove on how bad this project could be.

Here was the situation when I arrived at the

Georgia community:

The community was an independent living community consisting of 118 units. It had been open for several weeks by the time I got there, and the failed sales team had moved in seven residents. Yes, there were only seven residents, and the company was getting ready for their big grand opening celebration event. The problem I immediately faced was that there were no more prospects in the queue to move in. No one was coming. I mean, the pipeline was drained after a mere seven move-ins. However, I immediately reviewed a list of new prospects and determined that there was more than an adequate number of inquiries. Things

were looking up. I also discovered that there was an average of 14 new prospect tours per week. That was also a good sign! I proceeded to fill the community to 95 percent occupancy in less than six months (my negotiated length of stay). Shortly after that, the community was 100 percent occupied.

A noteworthy part of this situation is that when the previous sales team described how bad things were, I believed them because they said it with such conviction. The problem was that the stories weren’t true. The reality was that there was substantial demand for this community, but unfortunately, the sales team did not know how to execute an effective sales process. The lesson? Numbers don’t lie. Yes, if the numbers are there, chances are the sales are there. However, the salesperson must take advantage of each sales opportunity. When things are going wrong, it is easy to start listening to the stories and get distracted from the numbers and sales process execution; however, it is a mistake to follow that path. It is always best to trust the numbers and sales process execution and not listen to stories even if it is easier to believe them.